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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate some of the significant factors that relate to the effectiveness of the geographer and departments of geography in developing the important role that the discipline of geography has to offer to higher education in the United States. Geography must continually be conscious that many administrators, faculty, students, and society in general are not fully aware of geography's value. High quality research production and application, excellent teaching, and interdisciplinary programs are excellent methods for demonstrating its worth. The geography faculty member must be conscious of responsibilities both as an individual and as a member of a department. Many impressions of a discipline and a department are gained through informal faculty contacts and committee efforts. Major attention must be given to the maintenance of a positive internal image and reputation. Attention must also be paid to developing and maintaining the local and state image. The chair or chief administrator of the geography department also plays a crucial role in the success of a discipline. The leadership ability of the chair in reflecting the goals of the geography department upward through administrative channels is critical to the success of a discipline in a given university. Also of importance is the fact that each institution has a unique political and economic power structure. It is incumbent upon the chair and the faculty to be aware of and adjust to this structure. Success and sometimes survival require skillful playing of the political game. (RM)

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GEOGRAPHY IN THE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES OF THE UNITED STATES

by
Lawrence M. Sommers

The eclectic nature of geography has provided advantages and disadvantages to the successful development of the discipline at the various kinds of institutions of higher education in the United States. Each institution is unique in its goals, mix of academic and professional programs, makeup of faculty and administrative personnel, and geographical location. Thus th individual geographer and the unit to which he or she is attached must make adjustments to a wide variety of institutional and human and political variables. The degree to which individuals and units have made accommodations to these highly complex variations is a major determinant in the success of geography in a given institution at a particular time. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate some of the significant factors that relate to the effectiveness of the geographer and the department of geography in developing the important educational role that the discipline of geography has to offer to higher education in the United States.

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The Varying Academic Roles of Geography

The highly diverse roles that geography plays in various colleges and universities can be a major strength for the discipline, but this

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characteristic makes it hard to generalize about the most effective strategies for success in all cases. First, the division of the subject matter of geography into physical and cultural phenomena means that the discipline can fit into several administrative divisions of an institution. The current predominance of human oriented faculty interests in most geography departments means that a college of social science may be the most logical home. In most cases, the administrative home of a department is well established and there is little opportunity for a choice in this matter. If there is a choice, the selection should take into consideration the place in which the administration will be the most encouraging to the development of the discipline. A dean that supports the discipline is a crucial administrative ingredient. Second, the mix of other fields in the college-level administrative unit and the degree to which they are supportive of geography is also important. This is particularly true in times when there is intense institutional competition for limited budget dollars. Third, it is important that the chair of a department as well as faculty members be highly cognizant of the importance of building effective bridges at administrative, program, research, and service levels. Support within institutions of higher education must be built upon effective knowledge of what we have to contribute as geographers and the quality of our teaching, research, and service efforts. A national or international image is of limited value locally if geographers do not interact successfully with their colleagues and administrators and do not contribuute in a meaningful way to the teaching and service functions of their unit and institution.

Geography is fortunate in that spatial understandings are (or should be) at the core of a liberal education, and at the same time have direct vocational applications through such areas as cartography, remote sensing, regional planning, and the assessment of environmental impact. The spatial approach to knowledge is increasingly necessary for citizens in a country and world where declining finite resources and space for activity and living opportunities make the contributions of the geographer crucial to the success of a community, state, or nation. Thus the understanding of what places are like is significant to political decision makers, employers, employees, and residents in general of the diverse spaces or areas (at various levels of scale) in the United States.

From the above it is obvious that geography can contribute in various ways to the curriculum of the individual student and the programs being developed by a variety of units in the university or college. The major role will undoubtedly continue to be one of service, where the geographic approach, tools, and methodology supplement the substance and approaches of other disciplines and professions. It is important that most students (all would be the ultimate goal), on an elective or required basis, should be introduced to the contributions of the geographic approach in facilitating understandings at the local, regional, and national and global levels. In some programs such as urban studies, planning, teacher training, foreign area programs, and others, geography courses should form an integral part of those curricula.

The undergraduate geography major especially provides an opportunity to develop specialized skills and training that allows an individual to be

liberally educated as well as to obtain entry-level skills to a potential vocation. Care should be given to the development of a strong undergraduate program or major in all institutions, even those with master;s and Ph.D. programs. The undergraduate program is basic to the success of the discipline. It also provides the opportunities for the development of programs leading to vocational opportunities, and provides the base for recruiting students for further training in applied research and graduate programs. The discipline is only as strong as the quality and quantity of undergraduate education nationwide. Departments should be conscious of this fact when developing undergraduate curricula and deciding on priorities and strategies.

The increasing importance of general education in various forms in most institutions of higher learning presents unique opportunities for geography. 1) Where the guidelines for general education are broad and loosely structured, 2) geography can play a major role through the contribution of its unique approach. It can also fit well into groupings of courses in various social, physical, and humanities approaches to general education.

Geography is also a natural in such thrusts as world society, world cultures, global studies and international understandings. The general education area is often highly political and sometimes controversial within institutions, and so geographers need to be concious of where their offerings will be best accepted by faculty, advisers, and administrators. In any case, solid teaching is crucial to continued or increasing success in the general education arena.

The Understanding of Geography as a Field by Various University Components

Geography must continually be concious that many (if not most) administrators, faculty, and students are not fully aware of the role geography can play in higher education and to society in general. This is due to a variety of reasons, but important are the lack of, or the poor teaching of, the subject in the public schools levels and the absence of development or the limited availability of geography curricula in many colleges and universities, particularly private institutions in the east.

The chief academic officer (academic vice president or provost) of the college or university and the dean of the college in which geography is (or may be) administratively located are crucial to successful inclusion of geography as a subject and department in institutions of higher education. Because most academic decisions, including budget decisions, flow through these two persons, their understanding of the role of geography and support of its contribution to the educational process are vital. The dean is unquestionably the most significant in the decision-making process. If there is a change in either of these positions, the geographers of the institution, and especially the chair, should make sure that the new administrator is fully aware of the nature and importance of geography. Highly regarded research production and excellent teaching are, of course, central in convincing any administrator of the value of geography, but service efforts and research applications both within and outside the various institutions can be very effective in this process.

Another critical component of a university in judging and influencing the success of a discipline such as geography is the faculty of the units with which geography relates in various ways, as well as the total faculty of the institution. The curriculum and programs of the department must usually be approved by the faculty serving on key committees or councils. These decisions are always important, but in times of financial stress the recognition of the value of geography by the faculty at large becomes even more decisive. Thus, both the faculty and the administration must be made aware of the contributions of geography not only through high-quality research and good teaching but also through individual and departmental efforts that more informally make the value of geography known. Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary programs provide excellent opportunities to demonstrate the role of geography to colleagues in other disciplines.

Students are a vital third judge of the value of geography in an institution. They are greatly influenced by the reputation of a teacher, course, or department among their peers. It is assumed that the bulk of the students are searching for quality rather than an easy course or grade. Respect for students and continuing concern over reaching better-than-average teaching levels will pay off for an individual scholar and the discipline.

Finally, attention needs to be directed to the public at large, including geography alumni. Maintaining good support levels in the community and public served by the university has significant payoffs. The alumni majors, both undergraduate and graduate, are the main representatives

of the department of geography in developing and maintaining a desirable image among the general public. Thus, the quality of training received and the diffusion of the contribution of geography to industry, government, education and other service areas are major factors in geography's increasing its image and role in society. The societal role of geography brings to focus the application of the tools, methods, and substance of the discipline and indicates that major attention needs to be given to developing applied geography at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Geography Faculty in the University

The geography faculty member must be continually conscious of responsibilities both as an individual and as a member of a department. Too often, the major concern is about individual professional progress with a much smaller consideration of the importance of the image and success of the discipline and department in the institution. The success of the department as a whole is primarily achieved by good teaching and research; but often neglected is the importance of service, advising, committee roles and contacts elsewhere in the university. Many impressions of a discipline, an individual faculty member, and a department are gained through faculty contacts gained in service and committee efforts. Unfortunately, these efforts are not given much credit compared to the quality of individual research in the normal department value system that leads to promotion, tenure, and merit raises. College and university committees usually provide excellent opportunities for faculty members to discuss current teaching and research informally, besides contributing to the mission of a particular

committee. Both the individual and the home department stand to gain from high-quality efforts outside the unit of appointment.

Research publications and service efforts within a discipline, university, and community should be publicized by whatever means are normally available in an institution. Such publicity can often lead to contacts with faculty in other units that may be interested in similar research, teaching or service projects. Any effort to make the work of an individual and thus the discipline of geography known in an institution will normally have cumulative and long-term payoffs.

The Department of Geography in the College and University

The discipline must establish its role in an institution through efforts of the individual faculty member as well as the collective image and efforts of the entire department. In most cases, the effort of the individual will also benefit the collective whole of the unit. However, if an individual is primarily interested in a national or international reputation and undervalues the role of good teaching and service efforts on his/her own campus, the unit can suffer. There are instances in the decision-making process where the good of the unit must or should prevail over what seems best for the individual. As money to support higher education decreases, the reputation of a discipline or department in a college or university becomes more and more important. Nationally recognized research will not often substitute for or offset declining enrollments, poor student response, and internal bickering in times of severe competition and program cuts or curtailments. If administrators are

searching for areas to cut, departments with low enrollments and limited numbers of majors are easy targets. Thus major attention must be given to the maintenance of a positive internal image and reputation among administrators, faculty in other departments, and students. This means that some faculty members may need to revamp their individual objectives and be sure that that their academic decisions and efforts are for the collective good of the unit and the university and not only for individual professional or personal goals.

In state-supported institutions, the individual geographer and the unit must be highly conscious of how the state is being served by the individual and collective efforts. This is particularly true in land-grant and state universities where a principal objective of the institutions is to serve the people of the state.[1] A major part of this responsibility can be carried out through good teaching for the students of the state, but it is also to be expected that some faculty research and service efforts be applied in nature—for the direct benefit of the citizens. This is a natural educational extension effort in agriculture and other professions, but geography also lends itself to research that is of value, in an applications sense, to society. Thus any geography unit would be well advised to develop and to present both basic and applied knowledge and programs in the teaching, research, and service efforts of individuals and as well as the collective unit. The approach of geography provides useful understandings and some solutions (if only partial) to the many problems of society that involve spatial considerations. Such successful application of geographic tools, methodology, and knowledge can make the discipline better known in

the university, state, and nation, and helps to solidify the place of geography in institutions of higher learning.

The chair, or chief administrator of a department of geography, plays a crucial role in the success of a discipline in the college or university. This person represents the department in the important budget, academic program, and personnel decisions that affect every aspect of the operation of a unit. Especially important are good working relations and mutual respect between the dean and the chair. The leadership ability of the chair in reflecting the goals of the geography department upward through administrative channels is critical to the success of the discipline in a given institution. Equally significant is the ability of the unit administrator to develop a cohesive group of faculty in accomplishing effective teaching, research, and service efforts as individuals and as a total unit. Highly crucial is advice given to an individual faculty member that will allow him/her to develop specific talents and a professional career to the utmost while at the same time contributing to the best interests of the unit. The chair must initiate and lead in a way that channels individual abilities in the best interests of the individual, the unit and the university. The chair of a department has a most difficult and in many ways the most important administrative role in the university as he/she is on the firing line where the goals and objectives of the institution are being implemented vis-a-vis the student body, faculty, and administration.

Any individual geographer or geography unit must recognize that a college or university is a highly political organization. The competition

between departments and colleges within a university is keen for budget dollars, enrollments, acceptance of academic programs, space, and in many other ways. Chairs of departments are especially caught up in this political process, but individual faculty may also be involved in important ways. Each institution has a unique political and economic power structure, and it is incumbent upon the chair and the faculty to be aware of and adjust to this structure. Success and sometimes survival means skillfully playing the political game.[2] It is important to build allies within an institution through the teaching of good courses utilized by a variety of fields (sometimes as requirements); building liaisons with faculty in closely related areas such as history, social science, geology, resource development, marketing, and agriculture; effective communication within the institution about the courses and programs geography has to offer; the development and participation in of joint programs; and the cosponsorship of lectures and other academic events.

Effective participation on university and college committees is politically important to the department. This is true not only because it is useful to have department representatives on committees where important issues are discussed and academic decisions made but also because committees are an excellent medium for developing contacts with other faculty from a wide range of disciplines. Participation in this organizational aspect of the university system should be encouraged, and high-quality efforts should be acknowledged in the value system of the unit when making tenure, promotion, and merit-pay decisions.

Conclusions

The specific mode of successful operation of an individual geographer and the geography unit depends on the nature of the academic institution and the political and economic conditions of a particular time. However, there are some general considerations that have universal application. Some of the most important of these are: 1) emphasis should be placed on consistent high-quality teaching, research, and service efforts that solidifies the position of an academic unit in a college or university; 2) decisions need to be made for the good of the unit, especially in times of financial stress; 3) a national reputation is important, but in current competition for scarce funds major attention needs to be paid to developing and maintaining the local and state image; 4) adjustments must be made to the political character of the college or university; and 5) individual and unit leadership roles are crucial in enhancing the image and spreading the value of a discipline.

Geography, its approach and understandings, has a major role to play in the education of the citizenry of the United States and in contributing to the solution of many problems facing society. The challenge to a department of geography and the individual members that comprise the unit is considerable, and constant vigil and effort is needed to assure success.

[1]The Morrill Land-Grant College Act of 1862 stipulates that each state should have "at least one college where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies, and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and mechanic arts, in such a manner as the Legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe in order to promote the liberal and practical education of industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions of life." H.A. Berg, "Morrill Land-Grant College Act of 1862," Michigan State University, August 1965, p. 40.

[2]George Kish and Robert M. Ward, "A Survival Package for Geography and Other Endangered Disciplines," AAG Newsletter, vol. 16, No. 10, Dec. 1, 1981, pp. 8 & 14.